

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

hand, together make up only one side of the dispute. The Mishnah does not say “Korach and all of his congregation and Moses,” or “Korach and all of his congregation and Aaron,” or perhaps “Korach and all of his congregation and God.” The construction of the argument demonstrates what makes it not *l’shem shamayim*. A proper *makhloket* is relational, it’s a social encounter between one person and another. But Korach wasn’t arguing *with* anybody, he was only arguing for himself.

This stands in contrast to the relationship Moses has with God, of which Korach is so envious— God talks with Moses, according to Parashat Ki Tisa, “face to face.” Moses even argues with God in this way, although usually it is not Moses defending himself personally, but rather using his influence with God to protect Israel from His wrath. This is the case shortly before the above quoted verse, in Moses’ standoff with God on Mount Sinai after the sin of the Golden Calf. By the time Korach comes along with his leading question, Moses has already had to defend his people three times. This, according to Rashi, is why Moses falls on his face. How will he plead our case this time?

But maybe Moses also falls on his face because he can’t approach this *makhloket* with Korach “*face-to-face*” as he would a *makhloket* with God. Korach says to Moses “*Rav l’chem!*” It is too much for you! He speaks as though divine service is a commodity to which a person is entitled, to be bought with some sort of inherent holiness. Moses, knowing that his service to God is a relationship, not a job title, can’t respond to Korach’s incoherent premise. All he can do is call on the real party with whom Korach disagrees— God himself, who chose Moses and Aaron to be his servants and did not choose Korach any more than Moses or Aaron chose themselves— to intervene.

At first glance, it might be hard to see why Korach is the villain in this story. We don’t run our societies on hereditary priesthoods or prophecy on mountaintops anymore. We elect representatives, and we encourage our fellow citizens— members of the holy congregation— to challenge those leaders, and often to run in contentious elections to replace them. But we still must remember that the office of President or Prime Minister, like that of Moshe or the *kohen gadol*, are offices of public (and divine) service— not some glamorous position to which any individual is entitled. And now it is our job, in a time when the Earth does not open up to swallow bad actors as soon as they advocate their cause, to distinguish between a servant and an opportunist, an activist and a troll, a *makhloket l’shem shamayim* and a *makhloket* that is nothing of the sort.



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Korach

June 16, 2018 | 3 Tammuz 5778

Annual | Numbers 16:1-18:32 (Etz Hayim p. 860-875; Hertz p. 639-648)
Triennial | Numbers 16:20-17:24 (Etz Hayim p. 863-869; Hertz p. 641-646)
Haftarah | 1 Samuel 11:14-12:22 (Etz Hayim p. 876-879; Hertz p. 649-451)

D’var Torah: The Original Troll

Leon Kraiem, Conservative Yeshiva Student

There’s something rhythmically striking about verses 3-4 of Parashat Korach. “[Korach and his followers] gathered together against Moses and Aaron,” we’re told, “and said to them, ‘It is too much for you! For the entire assembly — all of them — are holy and God is among them; why do you exalt yourselves over the congregation of God?’”

At which point, “Moses heard and fell on his face.”

We’ve all had moments in which someone— perhaps on the Internet or at a family gathering— presents us with an argument so absurd, or so abhorrent, that we just don’t know where to begin. But Korach’s question, at least to the modern, democratic reader, doesn’t seem so wild. There’s even something beautiful about his construction that “the entire assembly...are holy.” Heschel quotes this pasuk ironically in “God in Search of Man.” So how come Moses doesn’t engage?

“Every argument that is for the sake of heaven (*l’shem shamayim*) is destined to endure,” say the sages in Pirkei Avot. “But if it is not for the sake of heaven it is not destined to endure. What is an example of an argument for the sake of heaven? The argument of Hillel and Shammai. What is an example of an argument not for the sake of heaven? The argument of Korach and all of his congregation.”

This last phrase is an odd construction. Hillel argued with Shammai. They were the two parties of the *makhloket*. Korach and his congregation, on the other

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D'var Haftarah: Being Above Reproach

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Positions of power carry with them the potential for dishonest and disreputable behavior. Even honest leaders must worry about their reputations. Moses and Samuel, who served their people as both prophets and political leaders, were indisputably honest. Still, simply being a leader meant, at times, having to defend their reputations. Moses, when confronted by Korach and his cohort, was compelled to defend himself against charges of abuse of power: "Moses was aggrieved and said to the Lord: 'Pay no attention to their offering. I have not taken the donkey of any one of them, nor have I wronged any one of them.'" (Numbers 16:15) Similarly, Samuel felt a need to defend himself when the people want to exchange his leadership for that of a king: "Here I am! Witness against me before the Lord and before His anointed. Whose ox have taken and whose donkey have taken, whom have wronged and whom have I abused, and from whose hand have I taken a bribe to avert my eyes from him? I shall return it to you!" (1 Samuel 12:3)

The following midrash was so impressed by the principles expressed in these declarations that in its retelling of these episodes it expanded their application: "[Moses said:] 'Even things that it would have been appropriate for me to take, I did not take. It is normal for someone doing holy work, to take his or her fee from the sanctuary. I, on the other hand, when I was travelling from Midian to Egypt [to redeem the people], should have taken from them a donkey [to make the trip], since I went down for their sake. Still, I did not take one. And so, Samuel the righteous said: 'Witness against me before the Lord and before His anointed. Whose ox have I taken and whose donkey have I taken? When I needed a bull to offer for your offering and to pray for mercy for you, or oil to anoint the new king, I used my own... and not from theirs.'" (adapted from Tanhuma Korach 7)

The presumption of this midrash is that leaders must remain above reproach. In order to do so, they must live lives that are "*lifnim mishurat hadin*" – above the expectation of the law. The temptations of power are difficult to resist for many who attain position. The Jewish tradition sets up its ideal leaders as models to emulate. They try to keep themselves above suspicion and fastidiously protect their reputations, in part, because they represent God, but also because their missions as leaders require it. We can only pray that those who lead us might try to heed this counsel.

Parashat Korach Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Moshe finds himself facing a rebellion which seems to be perceived also as an offense to God. By the end, the rebels are punished in a unique manner, proof is given to the people about God's chosen leader, and the position and salary of the Kohanim and Leviim for their work in the *Mishkan*, Tabernacle, is detailed.

- 1) Korach, a Levite and a cousin of Moshe, together with 250 leaders gather upon Moshe (16:1-3) complaining about the leadership positions of Moshe and Aaron. What might have happened that they suddenly decided to complain now?
- 2) Moshe reacts by falling on his face (16:4). What do you think the gesture means? Why did Moshe respond in such a manner?
- 3) Moshe addresses the group in bits and pieces (16:5-14). He proposes an incense trial, points out that the Levites already have a special position, and tries to meet with 2 specific people: Datan and Aviram. Why does he handle the situation in this manner rather than just give all of them one answer to their complaint?
- 4) Similarly, there is more than one punishment for what took place and its aftermath (16:23-17:24). What does it tell us about the nature of the group that gathered around Korach?
- 5) Following the Korach episode, God clarifies that only the Levites will work in the Mishkan (chapter 18) and receive certain things in return. What is the benefit of having a clearly designated group in charge of a specific area of life? What could be the negative aspects of such arrangements (for any of the sides involved)?

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